



Questions To A Moslem . . .

AN EXPOSITION OF ISLAM



Questions To A Moslem . .

AN EXPOSITION OF ISLAM

by DR. MOHAMMED EL-ZAYYAT

Counselor, Egyptian Embassy

EGYPTIAN EMBASSY

WASHINGTON, D. C.

1954



*This publication comes to you with the compliments
of the Egyptian Embassy, Washington, D. C.*

*Requests for additional copies or other information
may be addressed to the Press Department, Egyptian
Embassy, 2310 Decatur Place, N. W., Washington,
D. C.*

*Permission to reprint this material may be had upon
request to the Embassy.*

QUESTIONS TO A MOSLEM

Q. WHERE IS MOHAMMEDANISM THE DOMINANT RELIGION?

A. Let me explain first that the word "Mohammedan" and its derivations are not acceptable to the followers of the religion of Islam, because it might leave the impression that they worship Mohammed or that they accord to him a position in Islam similar to that of Christ in most Christian sects. They call their religion the religion of Islam. A believer is a Muslim. The plural of this Arabic word is Muslimun or Muslimin. The Persian plural, Musliman, or Musaliman, is used in Persia, Turkey and Pakistan. The English plural, Muslims, is used by writers in the English language.

The Muslimun, Musliman, or Muslims, numbering now about 400,000,000, are dominant in an area over three times that of the United States, embracing about 11,523,627 square miles.

In Africa, more than ninety percent of the population of Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya and Egypt are Muslims. Further to the south, the Muslims comprise about eighty percent of the population of the Sudan, and about ninety-nine percent of the population of both Somaliland and Zanzibar. About one third of the populations of French West Africa, of Nigeria, of Equatorial Africa, and of Ethiopia are Muslims. In Madagascar, Kenya, Uganda, Liberia and the Gold Coast small minorities of Muslims exist.

In Europe, Turkey has about ninety-eight percent Muslims, Albania about ninety-six percent, Yugoslavia eleven percent and Bulgaria nine percent.

In Asia, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and the smaller Arab princedoms such as Kuwait, Bahrein, Qatar, and Oman are all about ninety-nine percent Muslim. In Syria, about eighty percent of the population are Muslims; in Lebanon about fifty percent. Iraq has ninety-three percent; Iran (Persia) ninety-three percent; Pakistan eighty-six percent, and Afghanistan about ninety-nine percent. About half the population of Malaya are Muslims; about three quarters of the people of British Borneo and ninety percent of the population of Indonesia are Muslims. Small minorities (less than four percent) of the population of Burma, Thailand, Indo-China and the Philippines are Muslims. Within the U.S.S.R., "the republic of Kazakh" has about sixty-five percent Muslims; Azerbaijan has seventy-three percent; Uzbek, where the two famous towns of Bukhara and Samarkand are situated, has more than ninety-five percent Muslims; and Turkmen

has about ninety percent. Further eastward, the state of Sinkiang has seventy-five percent Muslims. About five percent of both India and China are Muslims. Low as this percentage is, it represents about 40 million Muslims in India alone.

Islam is thus the dominant faith in the southern and east Mediterranean lands, as well as in western Asia, to the south of the U.S.S.R., extending to the borders of China. It is the one strong connecting link between these peoples who otherwise belong to different racial and cultural groups: Arabs, Turks, Tartars, Iranians, Dravidians, Oceanic and Negroes.

Q. WHAT IS THE MOHAMMEDAN CREED?

A. Again the question should be changed to "What is the Islamic creed?" The creed is simple—"There is no God but *the God*; Mohammed is His messenger." The article "the" in Arabic is "al". The Arabic and Semitic word for God is "Ilah". *The God* in Arabic will be "Al-Ilah", pronounced Al-lah, or Allah, which is simply God with a capital G. The religion of Islam is briefly expressed in this formula. God revealed His existence and inspired His message to different great thinkers throughout the ages, in different lands and in different languages—to such people as Moses, Jesus and Mohammed. The divine message they carried to mankind cannot be but one and the same. The Muslims believe, though, that Mohammed is the last messenger of God. His message is registered in their holy book Al-Qur'an (in English, Koran), which teaches them to respect and accept all the prophets before Mohammed.

Q. WHAT IS THE ROLE OF MOHAMMED IN ISLAM?

A. Abul Qasim Mohammed Ibn Abd Allah of the Arab tribe of Quraish was born in the city of Mecca, in what is now known as Saudi Arabia, about 570 A.D. Unsatisfied with the pagan religions of his people, as well as with the social conditions under which they lived, religious and social questions occupied his thoughts through-

out his youth. He lived until the age of forty as a shepherd and a trader, and was brought up, like the great majority of Arabs then, unable to read or write. During his voyages as a trader, he was aware, however, of the existence of Christianity and Judaism as known in the seventh Christian century in Arabia. He used to meditate alone in the desert hills near Mecca. In the lunar month of Ramadan, in the year 610 A.D., in a cave in the hill of Hira, he saw the vision of an angel and was inspired with the first sentences of the Koran. These sentences, ushering in the religion which was to raise the ignorant people of Arabia unto an undreamt-of civilization were: "Read, in the name of thy Lord who created man from a (mere) clot of congealed blood . . . But man doth transgress all bounds in that he looketh upon himself as self-sufficient . . . Seest thou one who forbids a slave (of God) when he (turns) to pray . . . Nay, heed him not . . . Bow down in adoration, and bring thyself closer to God."

In these sentences a solution for both the religious and social problems were found. Knowledge will show man that he was created by a great power which is God. All men are created in the same way by the same power. Knowledge will raise him to a position of equality with other men. A slave will "heed not" a master who is a tyrant.

Belief in this great power, God, and in the initial equality of all men before Him, dictated that Mohammed would teach repeatedly that he was only a man, a servant of God, who was now transmitting His will as others did before him. Mohammed did not call himself even the founder of Islam, because Islam, being the message of God, has, in the teachings of Mohammed, existed since God revealed Himself to men. This was achieved through a line of great men who were the messengers and the prophets. Among these the Semitic tribes of Arabia knew men like Abraham, Moses and Jesus, who all gave their fellow-men—according to Islam—the same message of God. The religion they all preached was one of submission to the will of God, and was a call for a healthy, peaceful and just community—that is, a religion of "Islam". The Semitic root (SLM) from which this word is derived conveys all these meanings.

Mohammed's wife Khadiga, his closest friends, his men relatives were first to believe in him; then came the weak and the oppressed. The privileged class in Mecca fought bitterly to stamp out this movement. Mohammed ordered his followers first to take refuge in a Christian country, Abyssinia; and then he himself took refuge in a town where many Jews were settled, Yathrib or Al-Madina (in English, Medina). His flight (Hijra) to Medina and his relative safety there began the era of the Islamic Calendar. This year (1954) is the

1373rd (lunar) year after the Hijra (in English, Hegira).

In Medina, Mohammed became the leader (in Arabic, "Imam") of the community, as well as its religious teacher. Both the Koran and the example and rulings of Mohammed (called the Sunna) governed the daily life of the community and gave it its laws.

Mohammed was able before long to gather more and more followers, and to return victorious to Mecca. While destroying idolatry, he preserved the temple of Al Ka'aba because it was associated with Abraham, one of the great men whom he revered. Because Abraham was one of those who were inspired to transmit the true message of God, Mohammed considered him to be an early Muslim. Al Ka'aba, at Mecca, remains holy to all the Muslims today.

In his lifetime, Mohammed was able to break down tribal loyalties and unify all his followers, not only from the different Arab tribes, but from the different national and racial stocks who accepted Islam, into one united group believing in the brotherhood and equality of all men.

When Mohammed died, he was succeeded by a Khalifa (the Arabic word for successor) who became the leader of the community. Others followed, carrying the same title. They were successors of Mohammed as leader of the community and did not claim, any more than he did, any divinity or sainthood. They were, as he was, mortals, men who could and did err, while always reaching for the ideals set up in their sacred book.

Believing that these ideals are meant for all mankind, Muslims tried to preach their religion throughout the then known world.

Within a few hundred years after Mohammed's death, Islam spread throughout Arabia, across North Africa, into Spain, into Southeastern Europe, and across Asia as far as the Philippines, carrying the message revealed to Mohammed at the desert hill of Hira, and before him to Jesus, Moses and Abraham — the message of monotheism, of the equality of all men, and the dignity that man should reach through knowledge.

Q. WHAT RELIGIOUS PRACTICES DO FAITHFUL MOHAMMEDANS FOLLOW?

A. The religious duties which faithful Muslims should practice are four, excluding the initial declaration of creed that there is no God but God and that Mohammed is His messenger. These are:

- 1) Prayers, five times a day;

2) Giving about $2\frac{1}{2}$ percent of the capital that one possesses throughout the whole year before the month of Ramadan for charitable purposes. This money goes to a common fund, to be used for helping the poor, the needy, and the sick. It is also intended to be utilized for such purposes as digging wells, building schools and hospitals and similar charitable purposes;

3) Fasting during the day throughout the month of Ramadan, the ninth month of the Arabic (lunar) calendar (which started this year on May 4th);

4) The pilgrimage to Mecca, once in one's life, if possible.

Q. HOW DO MUSLIMS WORSHIP?

A. In his prayers, a Muslim faces the direction of the city of Mecca. When the time for prayers comes, in whatever place he happens to be, he turns toward Mecca and says his prayers. Facing one direction is a symbol of unity of purpose for the millions of Muslims offering their prayers at the same time in the four corners of the earth. The Muslim says the "Fatiha", and recites any other portion of the Koran he feels like reciting, because of its particular meaning, or because he happens to remember it. Bowing, and touching the earth with his forehead, he terminates with a formal prayer in which he, significantly, asks God to bless him and his people "as Thou hast blessed Abraham and his people". Here is the translation of the text of "Al Fatiha":

"In the name of God, most gracious and merciful.

Praise be to God, the cherisher and sustainer of the world

Most gracious, most merciful, master of the Day of

Judgment,

Thee do we worship, and Thine aid we seek.

Show us the straight way, the way of those on whom

Thou hast bestowed Thy grace

Those whose portion is not wrath and who go not astray."

The daily prayers are made by the practicing Muslims individually. A family can join in prayer, or any group which happens to be together. On Fridays, however, the noon prayer should be made collectively in a Jami (or a gathering place). This place is called "Masjid" in Arabic. This is the word from which the English version, Mosque, has come. The Friday prayers are led by a leader (Arabic word, Imam). Anyone of those gathered can be chosen to lead the prayers because he is known to be the most learned, or because he

is the oldest among those present. There are no ordained priests in Islam. In the more complicated life of the cities a certain person may always be available to lead the prayers, but this does not give him any special religious responsibilities or any different religious status. The call for the prayers is traditionally vocal, perhaps in contrast to the brass (in Christianity) and wind (in Judaism). The Arabic word for this call is "Azhan" or "Azan". The caller is a "Muazhzin" (English Muezzin). Again, this is not a religious function. The man who happens to have the best voice does it. The call to prayers begins with the words "Allah Akbar"—"God is greater" which is heard throughout the Muslim world just before the five times of daily prayers, the first of which is at sunrise.

Because of the uncompromising nature of Islamic monotheism, no images or paintings of any kind are permitted. Because of the equality it preaches, there are no pews or reserved places. The mosque is usually furnished with rugs and the Muslims form lines behind the Imam in accordance with the time of their arrival, with no distinctions whatsoever. A mosque must be open to all and there can be no privately-owned mosques, in the sense that privately-owned chapels may exist. There is never a collection. Mosques are usually endowed by trusts left by different individuals. Women may pray at home or in the mosque. Because of the different motions of the prayers, women usually pray behind men, or in a special place set aside for them. There is nothing, except the embarrassment the motions of the prayers may cause them, which prevents their sharing the same rows with men.

On Fridays there is usually a speech about the affairs of the community. The speaker usually stands on a raised chair, or a "Minbar", which has come now to be an ornamental piece in many mosques. A "Kibla" inside each mosque marks the direction of Mecca. Muslims do not face Mecca because it is the birthplace of Mohammed, but because it is the place where they believe Abraham built the oldest edifice for monotheists, the Ka'aba. In the earlier times of Islam, the Muslims used to face the direction of Jerusalem, again because monotheism was preached there.

Q. ARE THERE ANY RELIGIOUS RULES ABOUT DIET AND DRESS?

A. Muslims are forbidden to use any intoxicating beverages. They are also forbidden to eat "pork, blood, and dead animals". Ibn

Maymoun, or Maimonedes, who was a physician as well as a religious thinker, explained the corresponding Kosher restrictions as health measures, particularly in the case of pork, which deteriorates very quickly in a warm climate.

There are no religious rules regarding dress. Women are asked, however, not to dress or act, in a provocative or indecent way. Veiling one's face is not a mark of decency. The veil, or so-called "Purdah", a Persian word, has, in fact, nothing to do with Islam. The veil is an ancient custom. Some Babylonian goddesses are portrayed veiled in Babylonian inscriptions dating many centuries before Islam. The veil was a mark of class distinction, which was imitated by the middle classes in Byzantium, in Iran, in Turkey, and through them by the Muslim society in later days.

Q. WHAT PART DOES THE KORAN PLAY IN MUSLIM RELIGIOUS LIFE?

A. Muslims believe the Koran to be the divine message which Mohammed was inspired to deliver to mankind. It is the "word of God". It was memorized by a group of "secretaries" of Mohammed, as it was recited, and was gathered shortly afterwards in book form. The text has been kept intact for the past 1300 years.

The Koran establishes the relationship between man and man as well as the relationship between Man and God. It is thus the source of Muslim law, the indisputable authority on all Islamic religious questions.

The Koran is not supposed to be the only sacred book, nor to have revealed secrets not known before to man. It declares repeatedly that it is a conformation of the sacred books revealed before it. The Torah and the Bible are constantly mentioned in the Koran, and the Jews, Christians and Muslims are all given, in the Koran, the common name "people of the book".

Except perhaps for the first Commandment, which may be taken to be addressed only to a special group, and the fourth, which the Muslims cannot understand because—to them—it implies that God could have needed "rest", the Old Testament Commandments are all embodied in the Koran. Old Testament prophets are mentioned and their stories repeated. Jesus is greatly revered and is called "the word of God".

What differentiates Islam from Christianity then? There is no asceticism in Islam. The world is worth living and man's continuous serious effort to avoid evil and practice virtue and to be useful to his fellow man is his religious struggle. Because of their belief in the oneness of God, Muslims cannot believe in a trinity. Because of their belief in the equality of all men in the eyes of God, they do not believe that any man can be raised by ordination to a status higher than that of the simplest of men. They therefore reject priesthood and do not recognize any organized "church". Because of their belief that men are born free they cannot accept the idea of original sin. It follows that they cannot accept the concept of vicarious atonement, the idea of the sacrifice of the Cross, nor such rituals as the Roman Catholic Mass.

Apart from these points, there is no difference between Islam, Christianity and Judaism. The difference between Islam and some Protestant churches may be found to be less than that between these churches and Roman Catholicism. The questions which arise concerning association with Christians and Jews is thus easily answered. There is no prohibition of such association. A Muslim can marry a Jewish or Christian woman and she can keep her religion. The children born in such a marriage, however, are considered Muslims. A Muslim woman, on the other hand, can marry only a Muslim.

Since Muslims believe that the message of God is the truth and must therefore be one and the same in all religions, they explain the differences existing between Judaism, Christianity and Islam as emanating from the corruption of the existing texts of the Old and the New Testaments. The following passages from the Koran are significant:

"Say O ye who have received the Scripture (Jews and Christians) come to a just determination between us and you; that worship not except God, and associate no creature with Him; and that the one of us takes no other for lord besides God . . ."

Q. WHAT ARE THE ISLAMIC DIVORCE LAWS, AND DO MUSLIMS BELIEVE IN BIRTH CONTROL?

A. Marriage is a civil contract in Islam. It is valid when both parties give full consent. As a civil contract, the wife-to-be can, for example, make it a condition that she will have the right to divorce

her husband in certain circumstances. Divorce, which is described in Islam as "the most hateful of all licenses" is permitted only when all means of reconciliation fail. The following saying of Mohammed may give an idea about the kind of relationship Islam expects marriage to be:

"Among my followers the best of men are they who are best to their wives; the best of women those who are best to their husbands . . ." Muslims believe that divorce is better than a forced continuation of marriage. Divorced men and women can marry again. Widows may also marry again.

While abortion is considered almost an act of murder, there is nothing in Islam against birth control. Many good Muslims practice it.

Q. WHAT MEANING DOES MECCA HAVE FOR MUSLIMS?

A. Mecca, a caravan city on the road from Yemen to Syria in pre-Islamic Arabia, was the center of the religious associations of pagan Arabia as well as a center of its commercial activity. Mecca is important to the Muslims nowadays because of its Ka'aba, the house of Abraham. (Mohammed's tomb is in Medina, not in Mecca.) The pilgrimage to Mecca incorporates many pre-Islamic traditions. It takes place around the day commemorating the Biblical sacrifice of Abraham. After the Ka'aba, other sacred places, all commemorating biblical and Islamic incidents, are visited by the pilgrim. In a religion that ambitiously looked towards universality, an annual meeting of its followers had great social, political and economic advantages.

The exclusion of non-Muslims from Mecca is relatively recent. During the time of Mohammed himself many non-Muslims and non-Arabs lived in Mecca, and there was no objection to their living there. Essentially, there is nothing in Islam that prevents non-Muslims from living anywhere, including Mecca. The restriction was imposed when several non-Muslims tried to defile, destroy, or rob some of the Muslim holy places there.

Q. IS ISLAM DIVIDED INTO A NUMBER OF SECTS, LIKE CHRISTIANITY?

A. In the early life of Islam the problem of succession to Mohammed as a secular leader in the community centered around the issue of whether it should be elective or hereditary. Those who were for elective succession were called the "Sunna" or the traditionalists; those who said that succession should be always in the house of Mohammed, through his daughter Fatima, were called partisans, or "Shi'a". This political division was complicated later, but it is the origin of the two so-called "sects" in Islam today. The Shi'a are now dominant in Iran, the Sunna in almost all other Muslim countries.

In the explanation of Islamic laws, different schools arose. The major "Sunna" schools are four: "Hanafi, Shafi'i, Hanbali, and Maliki". Their differences, however, are not theological. They cannot be considered religious "sects".

The Sufi or Muslim Mystics do not form an Islamic "sect". A Sufi wants to remain in the world and serve humanity while being above worldliness. Some Sufis believe that, through endeavor and sublimation of human instincts, they may reach a sort of union with their Creator. The Muslim Sufi literature is a very rich one. In Persian, Arabic and Urdu some of the Sufis have contributed some of the world's masterpieces of literature.

Q. IS ISLAM DIRECTLY CONNECTED WITH POLITICAL MOVEMENTS?

A. Since Islam has from the beginning preached basic social reforms, it has naturally sought to implement them. Islam is believed to be a way of life as well as a religion. It has lent itself, therefore, to occasional movements of political reform in the name of religion. Reactionary and fanatic groups have occasionally agitated in its name. A true understanding of the dynamic forces behind Mohammed's message and its real spirit will help greatly in the establishment of a liberal, progressive Islamic society. It is as important for the Muslims to understand the real values of their religion as it is for non-Muslims to understand Islam.

It should be kept in mind, however, that since there is no "church" in Islam, such problems as the separation of the church and state do

not exist. Any "role" the religion of Islam will play in the society will be played through its influencing public opinion.

Q. ARE THERE ANY ISLAMIC BELIEFS THAT ARE CONTRARY TO MOST WESTERN IDEAS?

A. The answer depends on the definition of "Western ideas". There is nothing in Islamic beliefs that is contrary to the declared Western political ideas preaching freedom and equality for all. On the contrary, these ideas were the dynamic forces in Islam.

The only limitations on the will of the people in legislative matters is the will of God as the Muslims believe it was expressed in the Koran. No group of people, therefore, can legislate for instance, to abolish the principle of inheritance, or the institution of marriage. Apart from the basic principles, the people (through an accepted Islamic principle known as *Ijma'*) can legislate for themselves according to the changing conditions in different lands and in different times.

Islam is a religion of social reforms. Learning is urged in the holy book of the Muslims and in the traditions of Mohammed. A war prisoner in the early days of Islam was usually asked to teach ten Muslims how to read and write and was then set free. Over and over again, reading, writing, the pen, the book, and knowledge are mentioned in the Koran.

Muslims were urged by Mohammed to "search knowledge even in China". The result was an indefatigable search for Greek, Persian, and Indian knowledge and the founding on it of an Islamic civilization which contributed a lot to that of the renaissance in Europe and subsequently to our present-day civilization. An American authority on the history of education, Professor Paul Monroe, tells us:

"While Europe was enforcing as a religious belief the idea that the world was flat, the (Muslim) Moors were teaching geography from globes. When the Christians finally conquered the Mohammedans, they turned their astronomical observatories into belfries for want of any other use. From the Arabs came, in the tenth or eleventh century, the knowledge of Hindu notation as a substitute for the cumbersome Roman method. Knowledge of algebra as well as of advanced arithmetical processes, came from a similar source. In medicine, in surgery, in pharmacy, in astronomy, in physiology they added much that is now

considered fundamental. They explained the refraction of light, gravity, capillary attraction and twilight; they determined the height of the atmosphere, the weight of air, the specific gravity of bodies; they constructed various astronomical tables, and determined corrections for parallax and for refraction. They invented the pendulum clock; in commerce, in geographical explorations, in navigation, in improvements in all arts of life, their culture was far ahead of the Europeans; they introduced the use of rice, sugar and cotton and the cultivation of silk; they made Europe familiar with the use of the compass, gunpowder and of cannon. Thus in many ways the Arab culture served as an educational agency to bring the civilization of the West to a high level."

Other social reforms of Islam must be judged as social phenomena usually are, that is, by studying the background against which they were achieved. Polygamy, for instance—sometimes associated with Islam—was, in fact, an old Semitic practice. Some of the pagan Arabs were known to marry ten women. Some of the Jewish kings had more than one wife. Pondering over the present situation in the Middle East one is tempted to contemplate that, had it not been for bigamy, the descendants of Abraham would not have formed two nations, the Jews from Sarah and the Arabs from Hagar!

The reforms introduced by Islam are shown by the conditions which it imposes on this license. One can marry more than one wife if he can treat them all equally in every way. It is then stated that such equal treatment, material and psychological, is almost impossible. Many Muslims infer that this condition represents an attempt to abolish polygamy completely.

The position of women in Islam, again, can best be studied by comparing it with the pre-Islamic condition. Some of the pagan Arab tribes used to bury alive their female children, either because the women were considered unproductive members of the community or because of the potential risk to the "honor" of the tribe! The Koran condemns this practice in very strong language. Women lived under an arbitrary patriarchal power of the parents or the heirs of the husbands. Polygamy and divorce were unchecked. Throughout the Koran, on the other hand, Muslim men and women are charged with the same responsibilities, and given the same privileges.

The Muslim women were given sole control over their private wealth. They could be, and many were, traders, teachers, writers, and judges. In the Koran the brotherhood of man and the equality of woman with man socially, economically and spiritually are emphasized. Man is a member of a great fraternity seeking peace on

earth, and through good intentions and good deeds on this earth, an eternal life hereafter.

Mohammed has enjoined his followers to practice full and broad toleration of the views and beliefs of people other than their own. The Koran prescribes: "Let there be no compulsion in religion" and states "You have your religion and I have mine."

In stating all this, one must be constantly reminded of the fact that religion is an abstract. Muslim communities, like Christian communities, differed and differ in their understanding of, and their reaction to their religion. Fatalism will be the lot of the helpless, economically oppressed and ignorant. Bigotry will crop out in the socially and culturally backward societies. It matters very little if such societies are labelled Muslim, Christian, or by any other religious or non-religious description.

MOHAMMED H. EL-ZAYYAT

Gitar (J)

H. K. PRESS
WASHINGTON

PRESS DEPARTMENT
EGYPTIAN EMBASSY
2310 Decatur Place, N. W.
Washington 8, D. C.

Missionary Research Library,
3041 Broadway,
New York 27, New York.

Sec. 34.66, P. L. & R.
U. S. POSTAGE
Paid
Washington, D. C.
Permit No. 9413